April 2019

Farming the Land and Writing Poetry

Poet + Critic
XV: 1 (Autumn 1983)

FARMING THE LAND AND WRITING POETRY:

AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMES HEARST

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(James Schell Hearst was born in 1900. His first published poem appeared in 1924. He died July 27, 1983. During his life he published more than 600 poems in hundreds of periodicals and in thirteen volumes. He was a full-time farmer, a full-time poet and a full-time teacher at different periods during his 83 years. The following interview on the relation between farming and poetry is part of a much longer conversation recorded in the Summer of 1981.)

Ward: Jim, people usually don't associate farming the land with writing poetry. In fact, most people would think of the two activities as being in conflict with each other. Certainly the stereotypes of the farmer and the poet would seem to be opposites. From your own personal experience with both activities could you tell me what similarities you have found in the two?

Hearst: Well, I think in my dedication to the first book I wrote, Country Men, I said something to the effect that the book was dedicated to people who believed the way I did that a book, or a song, or a sculpture was just an imitation of what the real creation was. The real creation was seed and earth and flavor and weather, and this is what really counted. What we called creative work was just a fair imitation of what the real creation was. And, I don't know, I sort of still believe some of that. I felt that that's true, but I've come to be less assertive about it because writing is such hard work that it takes just as much energy as it ever did to go out and plow a 30-acre field. I'm sure it takes energy to compose music or to paint a picture or to carve out a statue, or create a sculpture. I think it's the energy that's important. It's an energy you have to take to farm, too. However you channel that energy, I think, is what makes the difference. There aren't many farm poets in the United States. So perhaps it hasn't been a stimulus or an excitement for very many writers to follow that kind of tradition. You'll find it more in the European countries. England has a whole raft of them. I can think of Barnes as one of them right now. I used to know four or five of them who were what you'd call farm poets. We don't have them in this country. I don't know quite why. There is a connection, I think, between the creative strength that we have and the acts that you use in getting the farm crop to maturity.

Ward: Hawthorne tried it at Brookfarm. He said he was just too physically exhausted to write after shoveling manure and working in the field.

Hearst: I found that I wrote in the winter time when I wasn't out in the field. When field work started in the spring I was too tired at night to write. I didn't have the energy to do it.

Ward: And as you say, there aren't many farm poets in the United States. Certainly the one I know best, Frost, has written some poems about the farm, but I don't think of him as a farm poet.

Hearst: Well, I don't either, exactly.

Ward: So many writers and artists in this country were raised on farms and left them. In your case, from being born and raised on a farm and working a farm for so many decades, what kind of values do you think might come out of that experience that would be helpful to a creative person?

Hearst: Well, I think it teaches you to do the best you can with what you've got. We never overreached ourselves. And I think this is one of the best things - to make do - to learn how to make do with what you've got. That's one of the things and to be responsible for what you had to do. When I write a poem, I feel a great responsibility to make that poem as good a poem as I can make it. Now it may not be a good poem when I get through with it, but I still am haunted with a guilty feeling if I let it go too soon. And I think I learned this out on the farm. You did the best you could out there. And even then, as one of our neighbors said when I asked him how his corn crop was, he said, "About what I expected, but not as good as I hoped." Well, you might have that hope from year to year, but your expectations are a little less than that. I think that's true of poetry too, you know. It never comes out as well as you think it's going to.

Ward: They say that farmers are realists, but on the other hand, I can't think of anybody that has to live on faith more than they do.

Hearst: That's true.

Ward: Faith in what the weather's going to be, what the yield's going to be, what the market's going to be.

Hearst: And you have to insist through it, Bob, on a kind of order. If you don't have order in your farming operations, you're a pretty slovenly guy. And I think that carries over into writing, too, feeling a sense of order. I learned that, and I learned that feeling of responsibility. And then I think another thing that I learned and I'm quite sure that other writers have felt the same way, an honesty for the facts. No matter how much a figure of speech may be a hyperbole, basically it's got to be honest in order to fit into where it should fit into.

Ward: . . . if it strays too far from the facts . . .

Hearst: Yeah, you're out in a no-man's-land of disorder and discomfort and unintelligibility, in a way, too. If I'm going to communicate with you, I've got to be honest in what I'm saying if you're going to take what I say on faith. I think those are the things of value that I've learned.

Ward: I've often thought that there must be some analogy between the farmer, the way he has to wrestle, literally, with the land, with the seasons and the way anyone who tries to write has to wrestle with words. Every day's a new day, and every poem's a new poem. You don't learn a formula so much as maybe you learn a process.

Hearst: Yes, you learn a pattern, you're right, a process of discovery. Well, the same way on a farm. You plant a crop, and you discover whether or not it's all going to come up or not. And when it comes up, is it all going to survive with chinch bugs and grasshoppers and the corn borers, and so on, and when it does, will it get through the hail well, and will the frost come too soon? I think a farmer's a great gambler. My God, he is one of the biggest gamblers in the world.

Ward: With far fewer things he can control than a gambler.

Hearst: Yes, that's just it. He's at the mercy of, oh, I think you said it, he's at the mercy of the weather, the markets, and how good a farmer he is.

Ward: I know more than once, myself, and I'm sure you felt, that you're at the terrible mercy of the language.

Hearst: Well, you know this as well as I do.

Ward: You just can't make it do whatever you want it to do.

Hearst: Words are stubborn. You can't bring them to heel. They just don't do it. You bet they're stubborn. And another thing too, I said, you know, a farmer's a gambler, he's at the mercy of these things. Well, you're at the mercy of words, too. When a poem comes out well, I feel lucky. Yes, I really do.

Ward: You won the gamble, that time.

Hearst: I've gambled and I think I feel lucky. And sometimes I wonder if I could do it again. You know, you have a little empty feeling in your stomach and you wonder, "I wonder if I could go again the way it went that time." I've heard painters talk like that. I've never heard any other writer talk like that, but I've heard painters say, "When I get a painted picture completed that works the way I wanted it to, I feel lucky."

Ward: Other poets, Frost, Sandburg, William Carlos Williams and people, have used farms for subject matter. But are you aware of any ways in which you think your poetry is different as far as your use of the farm?

Hearst: Well, yes, I think so, Bob. I think a lot of nature images are used by poets. Frost has that pose of the wise New England farmer which he uses. He does it well, too. It's a good job. And William Carlos Williams', "On the Road to the Contagious Hospital" is a fine, good poem, in which he uses the coming of spring. But as a fellow poet said to me one time, "Your poems are more sweat-stained, and they have a little manure on their boots that is different from other people that use farm imagery." I think that this is probably true. I'm closer to the actual work in the poem.

Ward: Well, you spent more years on the farm than most.

Hearst: Yes. And I worked out of the closeness with the actual process that goes on on the farm. I went from the inside, and I think it makes a difference. It may make mine a little more provincial, I mean . . . more limited, I don't know.

Ward: But, have you ever worried about that?

Hearst: No, no. I've never thought about an audience while I'm writing. I tried to write as well as I could. If I could please myself, then I was satisfied. And I haven't had to worry about an audience, because the books I've written have all sold out, and so somebody's buying them who likes the kind of poetry I write. But that wouldn't have made any difference; I never wrote for an audience. I don't think I'd know how. I don't know what audience I'd write for. I do remember this though, there was a while when I was beginning that I lacked the faith, I didn't have the confidence in myself. And I'd show my work to somebody that I thought might be able to help me. But there comes a time when you know whether you're doing your best work, and I don't have to show it to anybody any more. Either I throw it in the waste basket, or I start revising it.

Ward: That anticipates another question I wanted to ask you. Do you yourself see any changes in your poems about farm life? Over more than a half-century, oh, say, between "Reason for Stars" which you created back in 1926, and "To Build a Fence" written in 1979? Have you seen any difference in the way you handle this material?

Hearst: Yeah, I think I'm less romantic.

Ward: Really?

Hearst: Yeah. I think I'm much less romantic. I'm sharper. I tend more to be ironic. Like that poem "The Neighborhood" for example, and I think I'm not afraid any more of a flat pedestrian line, and I used to be. It doesn't bother me any more to make a plain statement in a poem. This may make the poem a little less intense; it'll take the tension out of it, but for my way of thinking, it gives me a little more flexibility. I don't feel quite so restricted.

Ward: It's interesting, because as in the early "Reason for Stars" you seem to be verbalizing, attempting to verbalize, a lot more than in the later "To Build a Fence."

Hearst: Oh, yes.

Ward: "To Build a Fence" concentrates on the detail, the facts of building the fence, whereas in "Reason for Stars" you're making a much larger, almost grandiose statement.

Hearst: It's a philosophic statement, too. Yes. A sort of a vision, a way of looking. I've become much more restrained. When I said I'm not as romantic, that's what I mean. I don't try to take in so much territory. I'm perfectly happy with just building a fence and letting that stand for whatever it stands for.